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THE LAWYER REFERRAL SERVICE OF THE DENVER BAR ASSOCIATION

By FORREST C. O'DELL

For the person of means, obtaining legal guidance is no problem, but the average salaried man or wage earner is under a handicap. He probably doesn't know a lawyer and may think of lawyers as being persons committed to the service of large corporations and the wealthy at huge fees; or perhaps, has heard of them as unscrupulous, and so he foregoes seeking legal assistance when he may badly need it.

In an effort to meet this need the Denver Bar Association established the Lawyer Referral Service about ten years ago. Any lawyer interested could join the panel without charge at that time. The names of the lawyers to whom cases were referred were rotated in order and when an inquiry was made at the Bar Association office the client was given the name, address and phone number of the next attorney on the list. The attorneys participating agreed to abide by rules established by the Lawyer Referral Committee, such as charging only five dollars for the first half-hour interview. If further work was required, the fee would be established by mutual agreement between the attorney and the client at the time of the initial consultation. If a disagreement arose over the fee, the matter was to be arbitrated by the Committee.

The plan grew slowly, but with the increase of population, the demands on the service increased proportionately. The case load became such that by the summer of 1957 the Bar Association office was averaging eight referrals a day. This created a serious staff problem for the Association office. The person receiving the call had to ascertain the nature of the legal problem involved, and select the next attorney on the list. If that attorney's card indicated he did not care to handle the particular type of legal question concerned, the next card would have to be examined and the client referred accordingly. Frequently the nature of the matter was such that the office would have to call the attorney immediately and

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advise him of the referral. A notice of the referral then had to be prepared and mailed out to the attorney. Thirty days thereafter a follow-up letter went to the attorney to ascertain if the client had contacted him. If so, the nature of the services rendered, the amount of the fee, etc., were requested in order to keep statistical control of the service.

With all of the administrative work required by each referral, the demands upon the time of the staff and the financial burden to the Association became considerable. Although no accurate study had been made, it was estimated that each referral cost the Association about three dollars. It was suggested by Royal C. Rubright, incoming President for 1957-58, that the Lawyer Referral Service Committee should attempt to devise a plan which might ease the financial burden of this activity. The Committee studied several plans and adopted a system which became effective January 1, 1958, requiring lawyers desirous of participating on the panel to pay an annual fee of five dollars for those practicing five years or less, and ten dollars per year for all others. The fund established by the fees collected provided sufficient money to pay for a classified ad in the telephone directory and a substantial portion of the salary of one of the girls in the Bar Association office.

Another difficult problem was presented by the client who failed to make an appointment with the lawyer to whom he had been referred, or, having made the appointment, did not appear. Numerous suggestions regarding a means of alleviating this problem were studied. Space limitations in the Association offices and limited finances made the problem doubly difficult. It was then decided to assign to one girl in the office the responsibility of making all referrals. For this service, a portion of her salary was to be paid from the fund established by the panel fees. An extra phone, paid for by the service, was put on her desk. As inquiries were received, she would ascertain the nature of the problem and the geographical location of the prospective client. She would then call a lawyer on the other phone and confirm an appointment at a mutually convenient time. This method of handling the referrals was inaugurated in August of 1958. When the call is received, the girl explains that a fee of five dollars is charged by the attorney for the first half-hour interview. If further legal services are required, the fee is a matter for mutual agreement between the parties.

During the last three months of the operations under the old system, 44% of the prospective clients referred did not make an appointment or failed to keep the appointment they made.

In the first three months of 1959, only 58 of 300 referrals failed to keep the appointment—less than 20%, which means that we decreased the “no shows” considerably. This meant a considerable im-

provement in the Service through a decrease in "lost time" for the lawyers on the panel and the Association staff and a minimum of inconvenience.

The Lawyer Referral Service is perhaps the best activity the Association sponsors for promoting good public relations in our community. Some progress has been made on an expanded publicity program for the Service. Negotiations are now being pursued to publicize the Lawyer Referral Service through the media of radio, TV and the newspapers.

For the service to be of maximum value to citizens and lawyers in the Denver area, a wider participation by attorneys and more financing will be needed in the immediate future. With expanded physical facilities soon to be available to the Association in the University of Denver Law Center, one of the handicaps to the efficient operation of this Service will be alleviated. Adequate finances, necessary for an expanded program, can be obtained by wider participation by lawyers. The younger lawyer should know that the average fee received per referral approximates forty dollars. The older lawyer should realize that those using the plan need his help. He should consider his obligations to the profession and to the people in need of his help. To him it should be a matter of honor and personal pride, rather than monetary gain.

The Lawyer Referral Service of the Denver Bar Association constitutes a valuable public service to the community. It provides a means to the citizens in the Denver metropolitan area whereby they can be assured of being referred to a competent, reliable attorney for legal representation. Additionally, it permits the lawyers to obtain additional clients and consequently improve their economic status.

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